charter (which, ironically, was just what the CIA had done in slipping into domestic intelligence operations).

Ford went on to say that this kind of caution was necessary to make sure the commission did not delve into the CIA's activities abroad. He didn't want it to do so, he said, because as president he had learned enough about the CIA to know that there were things on its record that would "blacken the name of every president back to Harry Truman"—the phrase rings as clearly in my ear now as it did then. The American people would be shocked, Ford said, if such information came out.

At some point in this monologue, Ford had used the word "assassinations," and this clearly seemed to be the dark secret he had in mind. (He had been told by Colby on January 3, as it later developed, of the long and sordid record of the CIA in attempting to murder foreign leaders.) I was not much surprised by the substance of what Ford had said. Allegations of involvement in assassination plans had been swirling about the CIA for some time. As early as eleven years before, on the weekend of January 4–5, 1964, at the LBJ Ranch, Lyndon Johnson had described to me and two other reporters his own shock at first learning of some of the "black" activities of the CIA—including, Johnson said flatly, complicity in the murders of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic and Ngo Dinh Diem, just two months earlier in South Vietnam.

Ford's discussion of this subject with the *New York Times* staff *did* surprise me. As he talked, I tried to remember if Nessen had put the session "off the record"; I couldn't remember that he had, and certainly Ford's discussion of the economy had been intended for "background"—that is, we could use it but without attribution to him. On one or two points, Ford *had* specified as he talked that he was speaking off the record—which tended to confirm my notion that everything else, including the CIA material, had *not* been put specifically off the record. It occurred to me then that despite what Ford was saying about shocking the American public, maybe he *wanted* us to print what he was saying about the CIA—or at least to investigate it, as Hersh had investigated the agency's domestic abuses.

That was not so farfetched as it may seem. Ford, in office so briefly, had no responsibility for the secret acts he was talking about. He might have wanted them brought into the open to prevent any possibility of a cover-up—at that time a bad political word—being charged to him, as well as to make sure that the CIA would not embarrass his own administration with more such misdeeds. He might even have had political

motives, if the record would tend to discredit Presidents Kennedy and Johnson—thus to some extent balancing off Nixon's and the Republicans' Watergate disgrace. Or Ford could just have been deeply shocked at the CIA's actions.

If he had had any or all those motives for tipping the *Times* to the story, Ford still would not necessarily have wished it to be the Rockefeller Commission that brought the record into the open. He had to work with the CIA, which would not thank him for appointing a commission to expose its deepest secrets. The agency had considerable capacity to embarrass or harass or damage him; and he might even have noted in Hersh's December 22 story that when former CIA director James R. Schlesinger first began an internal investigation of the agency's excesses, he prudently had had his personal bodyguard expanded.

Besides, how would the people *really* react, in view of the national-security mystique? As a veteran of government well acquainted with that mystique, Ford might have been reluctant to scourge the CIA directly and through his own commission; while as a neophyte president he might not have been sure enough of the reaction to proceed openly against the CIA. Leaking the story to the *Times*, moreover, would almost surely result in investigation by the Democratic Congress rather than the Republican White House.

Aside from motive, why would a politician as experienced in the ways of politics and publicity as Gerald Ford discuss such a matter at all with seven newspapermen, if he really wanted the CIA's secrets to remain secret? I could only speculate, but one thing thirteen years in Washington had taught me: that Ford had said these sensational things in such a setting meant that one way or another the substance of what he had said was going to become public. Even if he did not actually want the *Times* to follow up on his monumental leak, the likelihood was that if he would say such things to one group he would say them to someone else; and whether that someone else was in or out of the White House or the administration made little difference to the near-certainty that sooner or later these remarks would find their way into public circulation.

I was reasonably sure, for example, that neither Goldwin nor Greenspan had high security clearances, not ordinarily needing them for their work. Either might confide what they had heard to someone else; no matter how trusted, that person—even a wife—might tell a third party, after which the fat could be in the fire. If of seven *Times* representatives not one confided such remarkable statements to another soul, my entire

BY TOM WICKER. VIKING PRESS. 1978.

experience of human nature—particularly of newspaper people, whose stock in trade is information and the reputation for having it—would have been confounded.

It's not for nothing that any well-kept secret is kept by the minimum number of people who necessarily must know it; such things as Gerald Ford had told us cannot be said in the presence of eleven persons, none of whom other than Ford and possibly Nessen had any "need to know," with the reasonable expectation that they will go no further.

For the rest of the leisurely luncheon, I was distracted by mental speculation as to how such a windfall of information ought to be handled—which in itself suggests the extent to which I and the press in which I had spent my life were different from what both had been on that long-ago weekend when LBJ had confided his shock at "black" CIA activities. Then, it had not occurred to me that we should print such things; when my colleagues Doug Kiker of the *Herald Tribune* and Phil Potter of *The Baltimore Sun* and I later made notes—which I still have—of Johnson's conversation, we carefully entered only a cryptic note ("Trujillo and Diem") for that part of it, lest the notes fall into irresponsible hands.

But that had been before Vietnam and Cambodia and the Pentagon Papers and Watergate, in a different world of government and journalism. I am not sure, in retrospect, that I was even particularly outraged by Johnson's disclosures, since like most Americans then, I was persuaded that "anything goes" in the righteous cause of defeating communism and defending freedom. Nor did I then have any particular reason for mistrusting either the wisdom or the probity of the government; if such things were done, I believed, it was only because they *had* to be done.

By 1975 I thought it intolerable that American government should sponsor such criminal and indefensible acts as political assassinations, and I saw no reason why *The New York Times* should protect Ford against his own disclosures of such acts. If the people had a right to know anything, surely they had a right to know murder was being done in their name.

Ford did catch my further attention that day with a spirited defense of appropriating another $200 million for military aid to South Vietnam. Some note in his remarks even suggested to me the insane possibility of the return of American troops to Southeast Asia. On the way out after coffee, I pulled Ron Nessen aside; some years earlier, as an NBC correspondent, Nessen had been badly wounded while covering the war in Vietnam.

"You've got better reason than most of us to know that Vietnam chews up everybody who touches it," I said. "Don't let this guy get chewed up too."

Nessen knew what I was talking about. Some of the White House staff, he suggested, were working on Ford with just that in mind. He made no mention of the CIA remarks, or that anything was off the record except what Ford had specified.

After the luncheon, Max Frankel, then the *Times* Sunday editor, went directly to the airport and returned to New York. The rest of us went to Clifton Daniel's office and I immediately raised the question of how the CIA leak should be handled. Not quite to my astonishment, I found that only Abe Rosenthal, the managing editor, seemed to agree that the story should be published in some fashion. But in this case, he said, he was not sure of the ground rules for the luncheon and for Washington generally. Had the luncheon been off the record or not?

Not specifically, Daniel said, but it had to be assumed that such luncheons were off the record. James Reston and John Oakes both believed there was no question but that such explosive remarks had to be off the record; obviously, they said, the President had been talking in confidence. Arthur Sulzberger was properly willing to let his editors decide the issue, but said he had assumed the luncheon was off the record.

Even if it was, I argued, Ford had given us a lead on a story that was going to come out. It couldn't hold. And we didn't need to pin the story on Ford, or rush into print the next day with what he'd told us. Why not give the information to Hersh—even he wouldn't have to be told where the lead came from, just that it was from an unusually good source—and let him take it from there? We couldn't really rule out the possibility that Ford *wanted* us to print the story. And hadn't we learned the hard way during the long Vietnam years that our job was to print what we knew, at the least to decide for ourselves whether or not to print what we knew?

I deeply respect all the colleagues with whom I was discussing the matter, and I understood their different views. If Ford really had thought he was speaking in confidence and off the record, to print his remarks, perhaps even to set Hersh to work on the basis of those remarks, might be construed as an extreme violation of traditional journalistic ethics; certainly it would go against the ingrained instinct of every journalist who ever agreed to an off-the-record conversation. If publication led, more-